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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Sustainable Food Cluster underway in Elgin County

ELGIN COUNTY, ON - As part of a larger initiative to build a sustainable food system in Southwestern Ontario, Elgin has taken the lead in planning the first Sustainable Food Cluster in the region.

Elgin County is the pilot community for the Sustainable Food System project undertaken by the Southwest Economic Alliance (SWEA). The intent of this regional project is to develop a Food Cluster in each county in Southwestern Ontario to sustainably grow, process, aggregate and distribute as many different types of food as possible, for consumption within each local food shed. The Elgin pilot initiative sets out to develop an action plan that when executed, will enhance local capacity, create jobs and serve as a success template for other counties within Southwestern Ontario.

The pilot project is a collaborative effort involving the County of Elgin, the Elgin Federation of Agriculture, Elgin-St. Thomas Public Health, and SWEA. A team of local producers, processors, and commercial and industrial food purchasers was established to share their expertise and to identify action items that will build local capacity and enhance the local food distribution system.

"This is an action oriented team," said Alan Smith, General Manager of the County's Economic Development department. "The plans developed will be implemented so that we can produce permanent, rewarding jobs and share information to create a knowledge base that can be used to replicate the Elgin County process in other counties."

Many institutional organizations and the general public alike are looking for year-round sources of minimally processed local produce. One of the action items identified was to look at ways to process fruit and vegetables in Elgin County while adding value to local products. Ways of addressing unused agricultural capacity was also considered to be an important undertaking by the team.

"Ontario imports \$20 billion of food every year, much of it processed," said Tom Schell from the Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. "Replacing these imports with sustainably produced local food will not only create jobs in farming and rural communities, but it will also result in a system that operates within the carrying capacity of the environment and improves health and wellbeing."

As the project planning moves ahead, the team is seeking broader stakeholder input. A Facebook page has been established at: www.facebook.com/elginsustainablefoodcluster

More information is available at www.sustainablefoodsystems.ca.

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